

The Breaking Of The Never Trump Mind

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replying to [The Editors](#)

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Kesler's "Thinking About Trump" essay explained then why the NeverTrump right is finished now.

This essay is “dangerous,” an unidentified Never Trump friend [warned](#) Charles Kesler shortly after Michael Anton published “[Flight 93 Election](#)” on *Claremont Review of Books Digital*. “The only noteworthy aspect is the disgusting appropriation of the memory of the heroism of Flight 93 to make the case for Trump,” [tweeted](#) Bill Kristol, who if not the same person as the aforementioned friend, certainly shared his sentiments.

In the days following publication, Kristol used Twitter to try to out the then-anonymous Decius, correctly [guessing](#) that Anton was the author. Seemingly, his aim was to bring down punishment, maybe even a firing. He also shed his recently professed aversion to theatrical appropriation of memory, comparing Anton to Nazi philosopher Carl Schmitt—once again, [on Twitter](#).

Kristol, then still a stranger to being fired, was no stranger to dangerous ideas. Though this time around, he seemed less ready for war.

He and his Never Trump allies promised the big fight—the one for the soul of the Republican Party and the republic it stood for—but four months before Election Day, they delivered Evan McMullin. Kristol tweeted about the major blow to candidate Donald Trump, but skipped the war room and fundraising circuits that weekend, opting instead to take the family to a theme park. We know this because he tweeted it.

When Tucker Carlson, who knew Kristol and had written for his Weekly Standard for years at the start of his career, questioned the value of multiculturalism and the ends of America’s immigration system, Kristol was concerned and angry. But he didn’t pick up the phone or ask to meet for lunch. Instead, he called his old friend a racist. He called him this, of course, on Twitter.

From fantasizing about how European allies might publicly scold America’s president, to [musing](#) on how the Bayeux Tapestry “was kind of an 11th century version of Twitter,” Kristol and many of his fellow travelers’ Twitter thoughts come across more as social media escapism than petty politics.

The Tea Party’s anger may have foreshadowed the Trump election, but despite its megaphones and revolutionary flags it was still largely acceptable to discuss that party at Washington’s cocktail parties. Eventually, Kesler [writes](#), the Tea Party even “offered to let the Republican Party take over its thinking, which was a fatal mistake.”

Tea Party conservatives reasoned that the GOP had long been the vehicle for their

politics, even if it took a carjacking to drive the vehicle where conservatives wanted it to go. “Don’t let the Tea Party divide us,” the professional Republicans clamored—while the Democrats hoped it would do just that.

At 2016’s cocktail parties, the party of Donald Trump was decidedly less welcome. There were no calls for unity this time around, nor many offered in return.

When Jeb Bush touted his brother’s record on keeping Americans safe, Trump didn’t pay homage to the last Republican president. “The World Trade Center came down during your brother’s reign,” he replied. “Remember that.”

The professional Republican audience booed loudly, and professional journalists were aghast. But elsewhere, it rang true.

“I became Trump’s biggest fan,” J.D. Vance, a Marine and the author of “Hillbilly Elegy,” [wrote](#). “I wanted him to go for the jugular. I wanted him to inquire whom, precisely, George W. Bush had kept safe. Was it the veterans lingering in a bureaucratic quagmire at the Department of Veterans Affairs or the victims of 9/11? Was it the enlistees from my block back home, who signed their lives on the dotted line while Jeb’s brother told the country to ‘go shopping’—something kids like me couldn’t afford to do?”

“Trump was not the origin of the discontent,” Kesler [writes](#), “however vital he was to its crystallization.”

When Trump debated Hillary Clinton on the border, he didn’t color his language with “act of love” or apologies for our law. “We have some bad hombres,” he told the country, “and we’re going to get them out.”

The professionals were aghast. Large swathes of the country, however, agreed with him.

And that very night, when Clinton went on the offensive on abortion, conservatives might have expected more of the familiar Republican defenses: an oath of fealty to women’s rights followed by a nonthreatening confession of religious belief, finished with an agreement to disagree because “it’s the law of the land” or some such platitudes. Instead, in an arena in the Las Vegas desert, the New York businessman hit harder than any presidential candidate in memory: “Based on what she’s saying, and based on where she’s going and where she’s been,” Trump began, “you can take the baby and rip the baby out of the womb in the ninth month on the final day. And that’s not acceptable.”

“Such a nasty woman.”

Somewhere in Georgetown, the professional class may have blanched, but at Stoney’s Rockin’ Country cowboy bar on a highway outside the security parameter, a crowd of truckers, mothers, postmen and real estate agents erupted.

Trump “identified with working men and women, and promised (at least) to *add* jobs, to boost economic growth, to ‘win’ for pipe-fitters and waitresses, too,” Kesler [writes](#). “He defended their Social Security but blasted the fraud of Obamacare, whereas Romney had scorned the 47%’s ‘entitlements’ but gave Obamacare (based, you may recall, on Romneycare) a pass.”

Romney hit every bell the donor class asked for: Successful governor in a blue state, successful businessman, success of the Winter Olympics; religious but not too religious, conservative but pragmatic, and, paradoxically, seemingly willing to stay in Iraq until it had democracy and a middle class.

“Romney,” Kesler [muses](#), “lacked perhaps what Kanye West would call ‘dragon energy.’”

The Never Trumpers say they don't recognize a Republican Party where the core tenets are neither free trade nor foreign democracy promotion. But maybe they just didn't know their voters by sight, because the only party that has truly departed recognition is Never Trump.

Each week brings this movement a new and bizarre position: Opposing tax cuts, supporting Obamacare; wishing North Korean talks ill, wishing Democratic investigators well; dreaming of European political meddling, pining for American political comeuppance.

Rick Santorum, the Catholic working-class firebrand rarely seen among Washington's polite classes, had long commented that a party such as the GOP, with a donor class so out of line with its base, could not possibly continue to function.

There could not be such a massive realignment without something somewhere snapping, but despite the Never Trump hysteria, it doesn't appear to be the party. Though the president's House was defeated in the first post-Trump national elections and his two-year approval among Democrats lies at historic lows, his approval with his own voters—those who the Never Trumpers courted not long ago—is second only to George W. Bush after 9/11.

As the second year of Trump's presidency ends, these former Republicans have insulted and alienated their readers until they had none. They've squandered their time on unimportant, self-righteous panel discussions, finally reduced to bobbing up in partisan anti-Trump venues surrounded by men and women who called them war criminals just years before, buoyed for a time by saying the right thing about the right enemy.

NAFTA, mean words and Donald Trump cannot possibly be the origin of these shattered minds, however vital those were to the breaking.

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